The LIBERAL CATHOLIC CHURCH

and

The THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

WHERE THEY AGREE

and

WHERE THEY DIFFER

By

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NOTE

This pamphlet, written in September, 1919, is not an official publication of the Church, for it has not been practicable before issuing it to consult the bishops or clergy in different parts of the world. While it expresses the writer's personal view, he thinks he may say that it is also likely to reflect their opinion on the subject discussed.

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THE LIBERAL CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

There is some misunderstanding abroad as to the relationship of the Liberal Catholic Church to the Theosophical Society. It has been thought that the Church is an activity of the Society and that its members must be Theosophists, or even that the Theosophical Society has converted itself into a Church and taken to calling its officers bishops and priests! However wide of the mark such rumours may be, it seems worth while to correct any misunderstanding that exists. For misunderstanding breeds prejudice; and prejudice, coupled with a natural reluctance of the mind to adapt itself to new ideas, is the great obstacle confronting all societies whose work it is to give out to the world truths that are either new or so old as to be forgotten.

The Two Bodies Distinct.

The Liberal Catholic Church and the Theosophical Society are separate and distinct organisations. Neither one is responsible or accountable for the doings of the other. There is no necessary connection between the two. There certainly is no official connection, and no attempt has ever been made to establish any such connection, for that would be against the principles of the Society, whose governing body would have to be a party to the proposed arrangement. A member of the Theosophical Society is not

bound to join the Liberal Catholic Church or to take any interest in its work, and, on the other hand, a man can be a good member of the Liberal Catholic Church without having to give any allegiance whatever to the Theosophical Society or any approval to its characteristic doctrines.

But it is true that there is a large over-lapping of membership between the two bodies, and when, in 1915—1916, the British Old Catholic movement was reorganised (later to take the name of Liberal Catholic), those on whom its leadership devolved were all more or less active and prominent in lecturing for the Theosophical Society. Since then a number of the Society's members, men of profound spirituality and having no other object in life than human service, have sought ordination at the hands of the Liberal Catholic bishops and have taken up the work of the Church gratuitously and with an earnestness and devotion that call for the deepest respect.

It is natural, therefore, that there should be confusion between the two bodies in the eye of the public, despite the fact that the Church has from the outset tried to make it clear that, while it was glad to minister to any Theosophists and desired their help in its work, it did not wish or intend to appeal solely or even primarily to them. But the man in the street does not trouble to get at the facts about things. He represents things as he sees them or hears them from his neighbour, and takes a short cut in the process. "I hear you are interested in the Theosophical Church," he will say, not realising that his innocent and natural remark is throwing facts utterly out of gear. But even the clergy

and instructed laity of other Churches "make confusion worse confounded," for reasons which will emerge as we study why from the side of the Society no identification with the Liberal Catholic Church is possible and why from the side of the Church no such identification is desired.

What is the Theosophical Society?

The Theosophical Society is a large and influential body, whose President, Mrs. Annie Besant, is regarded by all who have the privilege of knowing her personally (and by many thousands who have not) as one of the noblest workers for humanity that the world has seen. Suffice for our present purpose to say that the Society has some twenty-four separate national organisations, with nearly one thousand branches in different parts of the world, and it issues over fifty magazines in different languages. It has a large and extraordinarily suggestive literature on a wide variety of subjects, and has exercised a profoundly spiritualising influence on the lives of many of its members. Its objects are as follows:—

(1) To form a nucleus of the universal brotherhood of humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or colour.

(2) To encourage the study of comparative religion, philosophy and science.

(3 To investigate the unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in man.

Of the host of misconceptions that have been directed against this Society, none is more stupid

than to suppose that it is anti-religious, anti-Christian or atheistic. It is none of these things; in fact, it is not a church, sect or religious denomination at all. It does not profess to replace religions or churches. Quite a number of its members are not specially interested in religion, but are attracted by the work of the third object, by study of philosophy or science or by practical social work. It is composed of students belonging to any religion in the world or to none, and it is not concerned with the church affiliations of its individual members.

It has among its members Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Parsees, Muhammadans, Jews and others. "No person's religious opinions are asked upon his joining, nor is interference with them permitted, but everyone is expected to show to the religion of his fellow-members the same respect as he claims for his own." "Theosophy," as Mrs. Besant has truly said, "does not ask you to leave your religion, but to live it."

On the face of it, then, the Theosophical Society could not ally itself with one religion, or sect of that religion, for its attitude is one of benevolent neutrality towards all religions and all sects. It will do its utmost to remove religious antagonisms and draw together men of good-will. In fact, anyone who knows of the work of Colonel Olcott, its first President, knows how he continually brought together on the same platform in India men of different faiths and rival sects who previously would not have consented to be associated with each other. It has very greatly strengthened the religious faith of many of its members, and it would be an easy task to point out numbers to whom it has restored a

living belief in Christianity. But the very nature of its constitution prevents it from abandoning this position of neutrality and officially allying itself with any one religion or church. Consequently we may dismiss as foolish any assertion that the Theosophical Society and the Liberal Catholic Church are one and the same thing.

Its Basis.

One other point claims our attention before leaving this aspect of the subject. The basis of the Society is a little peculiar. Nothing more than a declaration of sympathy with its objects, as above given, is required as a condition of membership. It is true that several very striking ideas—the doctrine of reincarnation, for example—figure prominently in the writings of leading Theosophists.* These are held by most of the members, but no member is required to believe or to spread these ideas. "The Society has no dogmas and therefore no heretics."

Why Misunderstood.

Now, we should be sanguine to expect the average conventional Christian to do anything else than misunderstand the Theosophical position. In the first place he is quite ignorant of these facts of the Society's constitution, and has possibly heard a number of erroneous and even slanderous statements about its work and workers.† Secondly, this whole

* A good presentation of these will be found in **Theosophy** by Annie Besant, price 6d., "The People's Books" series, T.C. & E.C. Jack.

† A Methodist minister once told me of how he used to cross to the other side of the road whenever he passed the rooms of a certain little local Lodge of the Society, vaguely feeling that this was the special resort of the devil. Later he became very friendly with many of its members.

position is so utterly different from his own that it is not likely to be grasped without a wholesale re-adjustment of his mind to the foundation principles of belief. Most of the Christian Churches work and exist on a credal basis. Their bond of union is the confession of a—theoretically—common belief. This basis of fellowship is clearly set forth in the baptismal service of the Church of England, and that of the Roman Catholic Church is similar. The sponsors must affirm on the part of the infant, as the condition of his admission to the Church, that he steadfastly believes the articles of the Christian faith, as contained in the Apostles' Creed, and will "obediently keep God's holy will and commandments and walk in the same all the days of his life" —an absurdly irrational proceeding, when one reflects how little surety there is that the child will develop any aptitude for these things, and that professors of theology at Oxford and Cambridge make what amounts to a specific denial of some of these self-same articles of the Christian faith. Steeped in all these associations and their attendant problems, is it likely that the conventional Church member will understand a Theosophical Society which allows its members to deny what might by general consensus to be termed "Theosophy" and to hold that "belief should be the result of individual study or intuition, and not its antecedent, and should rest on knowledge, not on assertion"?

In actual practice this credal basis of Church membership is very unsatisfactory. Among those who do think, there is often wide discrepancy between the real belief of the individual and the official profession of faith. And this leads to great

want of spontaneity, let alone insincerity, in present-day religion. The evil would be far more patent, were it not the fashion in the Church to take one's belief as an exercise of faith—which is supposed altogether to transcend reason. In fact, a mechanical view of revelation has converted the intellect into a Cinderella among the human faculties. "If the Catholic Church were to say that the moon was made of green cheese," wrote a bishop once to me in a severe fit of *intransigeance,* "I should reply: 'Very well, I don't see it, but I submit my judgment to the infallible teaching of the Church.'". Faced with such extreme statements one may well wonder whether it is supposed that in the creation of man the devil was allowed to make the mind, and the deity attended to the rest

The Liberal Catholic Church and its Basis.

The Liberal Catholic Church, in view of these undeniable facts, adopts very much the same attitude towards its members as the Theosophical Society. Of course it expects them to be Christians But within the ~~orbit~~ of Christianity it permits to its members freedom in the interpretation of Creeds, Scriptures and Liturgy. This attitude of tolerance and freedom does not mean that the Church and its officers have no beliefs of their own. On the contrary, they have a clear and coherent summary of doctrine. But it is doctrine, not dogma, if the two words may thus be placed in antithesis. It rests on its own intrinsic merit as a statement of facts in nature. The acceptance of these facts is regarded as a matter of growth and inner illumination, and is therefore not imposed upon the individual con-

science by authority from without. Those who take Holy Orders in the Church must have reached the stage where at any rate a general acceptance of these principles is possible, but of the body of lay members even this acceptance is not asked. The Liberal Catholic Church holds that the intellect, which is one of the avenues to spiritual knowledge, works best in an atmosphere of freedom and by methods of its own free choice. The intellect may be likened to a prism separating the white light of Truth into a richness and diversity of many colours. "In the multitude of counsellors there is safety," said Solomon of old, and a modern Solomon might have added that in variety of opinion there is wisdom as well as safely, for differences of thought combine into a synthesis of greater richness and make for a fulness of intellectual life in the community that encourages them. Therefore the Liberal Catholic Church does not require all its members to think alike on questions of religion; instead, it asks of them sincerity, purity of motive, tolerance, breadth of mind, courtesy of expression, willingness to work and a constant pursuit of high ideals. It looks for unity, not through uniformity, but in diversity. This charter of liberty it owes to the Theosophical Society, which first proclaimed it.

Schools of Philosophy.

Furthermore, many members of the Liberal Catholic Church, both clergy and laity, owe the very fact of their being Christians in any real sense to the deeper understanding of the Christian doctrines brought to them by Theosophy. As the Schoolmen of the Middle Ages had recourse to the doctrines of

Aristotle to give order and consistency to their teaching, so do most of the clergy of the Liberal Catholic Church (following the Neo-Platonists) look to the theosophic philosophy to give life to the dry bones of theology. Christianity has always had its schools of philosophic thought. The earliest Christian philosophers down to the time of Augustine were mostly Platonists; Neo-Platonism and Theosophy have also had their very able Christian exponents, and may as legitimately be applied to the facts of religion and nature as the philosophy of the Schoolmen. The Theosophical Society is perhaps the central exponent of this teaching in modern days, but it is one among several such organisations, and there are many Anglican and Nonconformist clergymen to-day who preach a mysticism indistinguishable from Theosophy.

Unfortunately, for some centuries past the scholastic philosophy has dominated the western Church. It is chiefly known to the man-in-the-street by the hair-splitting in which its exponents employed themselves. It postulates as absolute, as final and beyond question, the dogmatic revelation of the Church. It takes this as its established premise. Between the natural and the supernatural there is a great gulf fixed, and no bridge can span that gulf; reason may fitly deal with the natural order, but the supernatural transcends reason. When reason and revelation are thus separated off into water-tight compartments, there is little scope left for the play of reason. "The lack of a worthy subject matter vitiated all their efforts," says one writer of the Schoolmen, "and gave their speculations that air of unreality and triviality which strikes the modern

mind so forcibly." No student of independent outlook can pick up the ordinary textbook of Christian dogma without being painfully impressed with the utter bareness of the whole scholastic exposition of "the queen of sciences."

First-hand Knowledge.

The only corrective to this is first-hand knowledge of spiritual truth. Men waste incredible time and energy in framing elaborate speculations and in arguing with one another about religious matters. Some believe, for example, in a life after death, others do not; some refer back to the Scriptures for an account of that life, yet differ completely among themselves on the interpretation of the evidence. But there is another method of finding out the truth—namely, by direct observation. Man is a spirit, using a soul and a body. There are faculties pertaining to each of these portions of his being—the faculty of direct intuition, to give one example—and it is possible to develop and train these faculties. By spiritualising our natures, or in other words, by opening the windows of the soul, we are able to gain knowledge of the higher worlds and thus to speak with the only authority that is worth anything, the authority of knowledge. Spiritual truths are at all times capable of reverification by spiritually developed men. God has never ceased to reveal Himself in the world.

That this direct knowledge is possible has been the contention of the long line of philosophers, called theosophists or sometimes mystics, stretching back to the earliest days of philosophic thought. Since man is a fragment of God (or has the Divine Spark in

him) it is possible for him to know God, Whose Nature he shares. And by unfolding the powers of the God within him (which is the purpose of his evolution) he approaches slowly, yet with utter certainty, towards union with the divine Omniscience, gaining in that growth an ever fuller knowledge of the universe which is the expression or manifestation of God.

This view of things at once opens up new horizons of thought. It releases theology once and for all from the incubus of "the letter which killeth." It lessens in no way the value of Scripture and Tradition, which contain much of the original instruction of the Christ; but it places in our hands a master-key to the interpretation of this heritage of Scripture and Tradition, for notoriously it is upon this question of interpretation that the churches differ *toto orbe et coelo*. The religion of direct individual experience is "the true solvent of doubts and difficulties, the one apologetic that is unshakeable, the rock upon which the storms of controversy anent higher criticism and the historicity of the Gospels break in vain." The Church that encourages it becomes a forward-looking Church, ready to receive and to benefit by fresh light and inspiration, instead of a Church whose gaze is immutably fixed on the past.

Distinctions.

These points of similarity notwithstanding, the work of the Liberal Catholic Church differs very much from that of the Theosophical Society. It is easy to see that its scope is quite different from that of the Theosophical Society. It is a Christian

Church and its work lies with Christianity. It believes that Christ appointed a certain order of worship and bequeathed to His followers a body of doctrine and certain principles of ethics. Part of this teaching was given publicly, part was of the nature of more advanced teaching given privately to the disciples and handed down by them to their successors. No doubt some of this has been lost, and some of it has been so overlaid with accretion as to be obscured. What remains is a priceless heritage, to be guarded with loving care and reverence. The discoveries of modern science or philosophy may supplement or help us better to understand this teaching, but they also point to its changeless and enduring value. This is the nucleus of Christianity to which a Christian Church should apply itself, and it is with the teaching and humble practice of this Christian heritage that the Liberal Catholic Church is chiefly occupied.

The Liberal Catholic Church has the greatest respect for the other faiths of the world—most of the Christian teachings are common to other religions —but it has no inclination to propound as a new religion any synthesis of world-religions, imperfect as that would necessarily be, for it does not regard it as within the province of man to found new religions. It finds all that it needs within the Christian faith, while admitting that many of our jewels have lain hidden and that our exposition of the Christian teaching can be enriched and invigorated by studying the presentation of those same teachings in other faiths. It does not practise Buddhist or Hindu rites; it administers the holy Sacraments instituted by Christ.

Its clergy regard it as their chief work to be "stewards of the Mysteries of God," sharing with the clergy of other Apostolic Churches the privilege of administering those Sacraments. They look upon the Christian Church as a great brotherhood of all who turn to Christ as the inspirer of their spiritual life, their Master and Friend, and consider that His Sacraments should be freely given to any member of the brotherhood who reverently desires them, without any conditions being imposed in the way of intellectual restrictions. They believe that Christ appointed the Sacraments with the object of enormously quickening the spiritual progress of His people. They realise that this purpose is far more effectively carried out if the people can understand what they are doing and so bend all their energies of will, heart and mind to co-operate. Therefore the Church tries in every way to help its congregations to a right understanding of the Sacraments and their place in the spiritual life, and encourages the people to assist at worship not as listless and passive spectators, but as active and intelligent co-operators, almoners of Christ's blessing to the world around.

All this is a distinctively Christian work. Because this is so, the body which carries it out must needs believe in Christianity and be a distinctively Christian body. Once people grasp this fact, there should be no occasion for confusion between the Liberal Catholic Church and the Theosophical Society. It will be seen that they differ widely in the scope and manner of their work.

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